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Painted eloquence and serious games

‘La poésie devient pour toute une société un *jeu sérieux*’¹

When Harold Bloom coined the phrase ‘anxiety of influence’,² when he pictured poets entering into a psychic struggle to create their own imaginative space, when he spoke of their agonised recognition of their own belatedness, poets all over the world surely nodded their acquiescence. Here, at last, was a critic who understood the penalties exacted by the anguished need to be original. How, without duplicating or paraphrasing, were they to address love, death, horror, euphoria? Had Baudelaire and Mallarmé and Eliot not milked every word of its impact and left language worn and impoverished? To most modern readers as to Bloom, if rather less cabbalistically, it seems axiomatic that originality is the ultimate literary good, and that a poem which does not astonish is a poem that has failed.

This unexamined conviction makes the reading of medieval poetry particularly difficult. The naïve reader – myself, many years ago – comes to her first *reverdie*: leaves budding, flowers blooming, birds twittering; she meets the second, the third, the fourth . . . She is captivated by Georges Brassens singing *La ballade des dames du temps jadis*, only to find that Villon wrote two other poems on precisely the same theme, and that every second poet of the later Middle Ages had made use of the same well-tried cliché. To be told that Villon’s is one of the most individual poetic voices of the Middle Ages casts a dismal light on the others – and sure enough, as pitiless ladies, and martyred lovers suspiciously like Villon himself, trudge across the page, even sympathetic modern readers are inclined to throw in the towel and abandon the medieval lyric. Better informed, we discover that questions of anxiety of influence are profoundly anachronistic, that medieval poets were admired for the dexterity with which they

manipulated commonplaces which seem to us astonishingly banal.³ What I want to present here, however, is a different argument. I am wary, of course, of a 'romantic' reading which sees sincerity and sentiment at the heart of the medieval lyric, but, like Poirion, I am also wary of 'le vide d'une critique "purement" esthétique' – of the contention that medieval poets and their audiences took account only of technical virtuosity and ignored the 'intention significative' of the poems presented to them.⁴ I want to suggest, looking at the intellectual field within which late-medieval poetry in general, and Villon's poetry in particular, were produced, that late-medieval poetry draws its drive from what I shall call a poetics of engagement: debate, response, provocation, competition.⁵ Unfamiliar though the concept may seem in our society, in which poetry is still figured as the inward and intensely personal exploration of the self, late-medieval poetry, I shall argue, operates in a participatory culture of mutually reinforcing rhetorics, existing in a particular social and ideological milieu.

What I have just said is informed by the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu; I shall return in a moment to his contention that language, culture and social relations are internally coherent and interdependent systems. But first, let me sketch one of the 'social and ideological milieux' to which I am referring. In 1400, at the court of Charles VI, a group of magnates and courtiers instituted what they called a *cour amoureuse*⁶ to offer a distraction from the 'desplaisant et contraire pestilence de epidimie' which was ravaging the kingdom. Its membership included civil servants and jurists, luxuriating visibly in regulations, procedures and elaborate hierarchies. At the regular monthly meetings (*festes du puy*), the twenty-four *ministres*, chosen for their 'experte congnoissance en la science de rethorique', were to institute poetic competitions:

Feront solennel serement . . . de tenir joieuse feste de puy d'amours, l'un après l'autre consequamment, a deux heures après midy . . . Et de baillier, chascun a son puy, refrain a sa plaisance.⁷

No records survive, but what clearly constituted the social 'currency' of the *cour amoureuse* was the ballades and rondeaux, and discussion of them was what primarily mediated its group identity.

I shall come back to the *cour amoureuse* and to the *puy*, but first I turn to Pierre Bourdieu. In a series of studies, Bourdieu reacted as I am doing here against the notion, inherited very largely from

Romanticism, that literary creation is an act of self-expression; rather, he would see it as one component in a system of social relations between the intellectual field in which creation takes place, and the larger field of economic or social power.⁸ Language, he considers, is of vital importance in the creation of group identities: it includes those who can manipulate it with skill, and excludes or marginalises those unable to do so, and it thus serves to create the mechanisms of social solidarity and collective thinking which make groups cohere. To *exchange* artistic artifacts is to exchange what Bourdieu calls 'symbolic capital': to operate within a particular market in which producer and consumer are in collusion to procure a particular material or symbolic profit.⁹ Poets and artists, he argues, are producers,¹⁰ and like producers of any other product, they are constituted in social and ideological practices and relations.

How then (to return to Charles VI's *cour amoureuse*) might Bourdieu's theories of symbolic capital illuminate our understanding of poetic creation in the fifteenth century? Well, clearly in those circles the ability to versify with ease was a prerequisite for membership of a highly prestigious and advantageous inner circle. If ballades and rondeaux were the mechanisms of social solidarity and collective thinking which made this highly exclusive little society-within-a-society cohere, then the trump card for any participant was a *habitus*¹¹ consisting of elegance of expression. To be successful was to be able to invest one's mastery of language in developing the refrain set, in engaging with the theme prescribed.¹²

Now, the milieu that I have so far talked about seems at first sight far beyond Villon's reach, and yet of course he operated on at least one occasion (to which I shall return in chapter 3) on the margins of a circle just as elevated, that of Charles d'Orléans, and participated in a similar socio-literary ritual. Nor, more important, was it only for the aristocracy that symbolic capital was the way to social solidarity. The legists who devised the statutes for the *cour amoureuse* call it a *puy*, by which they seem to mean simply a formal meeting devoted to the composition and reading of verse. But the *puys* of Amiens and Rouen, Arras and Paris, to which I shall return in chapter 6, operated across a larger social spectrum. Although the ostensible pretext of these occasions was devout – the composition of poems in praise of the Virgin Mary¹³ – poets might also compete with *chansons amoureuses* or *sottes chansons*. This is presumably what provokes Bref Conseil's complaint in Martin le Franc's *Champion des dames* (1442):

*puy*s, he says, have become haunts of iniquity which exclude the virtuous, 'le puy du diable, Le puy qui au puis d'enfer tire' (3977–8) – good only for profane 'rondeaulx, balades, lays' (3985). Not at all, ripostes Franc Vouloir, champion of love; *balades* and *rondeaulx* are the very currency of the *puy*, and

Trop a il coeur *vil* et amer
Qui sa balade n'y aporte. (4255–6)

Vil, here, retains some of the sense of social exclusion which attaches to its Low Latin etymon *vilis*, 'valueless';¹⁴ social *inclusion*, then, depends on the expert production of verse. The poetry of the *puy*, in other words, is a vehicle which can, and indeed ought to, express the intrinsic relationships between power on the one hand and symbolic, literary, expression on the other: something which permits a dialogue among participants sharing an ideology of cultural and political assumptions and allegiances.

Now there is no evidence of Villon's ever having participated in a *puy* – although (as I shall suggest in chapter 6) his palinode to the Virgin Mary, the *Ballade pour prier Nostre Dame*, and the curious way in which it is interwoven with his *sotte chanson*, the *Ballade de la Grosse Margot*, insistently echo the patterns of the *puy*. But even if it were the case that Villon had never set foot in a *puy*, this would not invalidate my point that he was a product of a poetics of engagement and debate and competition: this is something, after all, that the *puy* reflects rather than creates.¹⁵ Instances proliferate, and it is not always easy to distinguish fiction from reality.¹⁶ Jean le Seneschal, for instance, in about 1389, claimed to be assembling the ballades which result from a debate over the advantages, for a man in love, of *loyauté* and double-dealing; he has, he says, submitted them to a number of his most noble contemporaries who have composed poetic responses, and he is now presenting an anthology, the *Cent ballades*, to a receptive public.¹⁷ Christine de Pizan, more soberly, presents herself as participant in and recorder of a 'debat gracieux et non haineux . . . entre solempneles personnes';¹⁸ the distinguished intellectuals who participated (jurists, theologians, clerics) have allowed their 'humble chamberiere'¹⁹ to anthologise their treatises and epistles for a wider public. Above all, of course, there is the most famous of fifteenth-century poetic debates,²⁰ the one provoked by Alain Chartier's *Belle Dame sans Mercy* of 1424, which was still rumbling more than two decades later, and which, even if it was no

longer inspiring new contributions, was being avidly anthologised and copied into manuscripts in Villon's own literary lifetime – and being anthologised along with Villon's own *œuvre*.

The history of this debate is now well known.²¹ If we are to believe the documents in the case, no sooner had Alain's *Belle Dame*, which purports to set down a dialogue between a lachrymose *Amant* and an acidly sensible *Dame*,²² appeared than it excited controversy: three *Dames* claimed to have been shocked by Alain's 'desraisonnables escriptures'.²³ Alain, contrite, responded with an *Excusacion*: his offence had been only literary. But if he supposed that this would be the last word, he was to be disappointed. In eighteen or more poems, the twists and turns of the debate exploit a variety of ingenious scenarios: the *Belle Dame* herself is arraigned in court and alternately condemned and vindicated; the disconsolate *Amant* retires to a hermitage, or languishes in a hospital, or dies a martyr's death.²⁴ This is not the place for a history of the *Querelle*;²⁵ I cite it because it exemplifies so abundantly what I have called the poetics of engagement. It was not merely a question of the successive writers exploiting a topos, or of their making a name for themselves on the back of Alain Chartier's poetic bestseller;²⁶ on the contrary, the *Querelle* required textual precision and intellectual investment. Telling phrases are picked over with positively academic enjoyment. In Chartier's original poem, for instance, the *Amant* had deftly recycled one of the more clichéd courtly metaphors.²⁷ The *Dame* is responsible for his plight, he says, since her glance had conveyed hope:

vous qui la guerre y meïstes
Quant voz yeulx escrirent la lectre
Par quoy deffier me feïstes,
Et que Doulx Regart transmeïstes,
Herault de celle deffiance. (226–30)

The lady responds tartly that she can scarcely be held responsible for the message that her doleful *soupirant* has read into a mere look:

Il a grant fain de vivre en dueil
Et fait de son cuer lasche garde,
Qui contre un tout seul regard d'ueil
Sa paix et sa joye ne garde.
Se moy ou aultre vous regarde,
Les yeulx sont faiz pour regarder. (233–8)

A few years later, in 1425 or so, Baudet Herenc returned to the same phrase in *Le parlement d'Amours*, his (highly legalistic) response to

Alain Chartier's poem.²⁸ Desir, as prosecuting counsel, accuses the Dame of murder. Eyes are made, certainly, for looking – but not if the looks are deceptive:

On scet bien que *les yeulx sont faiȝ*
 Pour a leur plaisir regarder,
 Mais de faulx semblans contrefaiz
 Que aucuns font, se doit on garder. (217–20)

But the *Dame's* case is taken up again in *La loyalle dame en amours*,²⁹ where her gallant defenders, Loyaulté and Verité, argue that the Dame's refusal of Chartier's Amant stemmed from laudable loyalty; it was Desir who had, culpably, made the Amant fall in love with a lady whose affections were already engaged:

S'aucuns par ses yeulx abuseȝ,
 Juge ce que son cuer desire,
 Et dame n'aura de son leȝ
 Pensee nulle qui y tire,
 Ce fait Desir, qui le fait frire. (641–5)

And the Dame is found not guilty. But then, somewhere between 1430 and 1441, another poet, Achille Caulier, took up the same theme in his *Cruelle femme en amours*,³⁰ in which Amant appeals against the judgement: the Dame's defence team, Loyaulté and Verité, were Fiction and Faulceté in disguise. A retrial is granted, and again the Dame is accused of misuse of Doulx Regard:

Laquelle [sc. the Belle Dame] luy a reffusé
 Mercy par son felon couraige
 Et *par son regard abusé,*
 Dont il soit mort (qui est dommage). (265–8)

What is striking here is the way in which the poets address offending phrases with a sort of exegetical relish, confidently anticipating a readership textually familiar with the original poem. To revert to Bourdieu, it is as if the poems arise from, and in turn create, a closed and complicit circle in which the exchange of ingenious glosses reflects what we suspect is a network of cultural practices. What is presented, it seems, is collaborative poetry: a group of poets who mark their belonging to a particular social and cultural élite by the expertise with which they can manipulate the givens of the original into new imaginary settings, and by the confidence with which they can count on the reader's textual and intertextual expertise. This does not, of course, necessarily mean that they are committed to the

positions that they appear to adopt: a participatory debate culture of the sort I am describing supposes a certain conceptual climate, a climate of position-taking which means that we can abandon the 'expressionist' view which would see the quest for the author's intention as the prime locus of our appreciation of his poem; we need not even argue the view that a literary act may express meanings or intentions of which the poet himself may not be consciously aware.

Let me offer an example, briefly, of what I mean by this last point. Of all the titles of all the *Belle Dame* cycle, the most lachrymose, perhaps, is *L'Amant rendu cordelier a l'observance d'Amours*.³¹ The 'I' of the poem, the *acteur*, comes in (yet another) dream to a magnificent priory church. At its door is the Amant, dressed in unrelieved black, weeping and demanding admittance as a postulant. *Damp Prieur* emerges to examine him and to explore his commitment: is he ready for the *poverty*, the *martire*, that becoming a *cordelier* will entail (137-44)? The Amant is unshakeable: a life of sorrow and self-sacrifice is his only desire (225-32). So far so conventional – and yet as they proceed, readers are led to wonder more and more how much the poet really invests in the stereotyped scenario to which he seems to be subscribing. Did you, says Damp Prieur, find pretexts to pass your lady's house, hoping for a glimpse of her? Not only that, replies the Amant, absurdly: I would lurk outside for hours together, 'sous ung auvant, / Regardant en hault les goutières' (403-4). Did you, says Damp Prieur, lie sleepless, entertaining 'maintes frenaisies' (462)? Yes, says the broken-hearted Amant, I would toss and turn all night; indeed, 'maintes foys place changoye / En faisant des piés le chevet' (471-2). And what did you do, says Damp Prieur, if you saw your lady smile at someone else? Well, says the Amant, petulantly, 's'avoye fleurs et marjolaine, / Par despit je les deschiroye' (599-60). Damp Prieur's studiously neutral questions puncture the melancholy self-absorption of the lover; suddenly suspicious, the latter turns on his interrogator ('Et me semble que vous moqués', 771). But not, of course, before the reader has recognised the potential absurdities of some of the sentiments to which he is being asked, on the surface at least, to subscribe, and not before his confidence in the writer's 'commitment' has been uncomfortably challenged.³²

The audience for the *Amant rendu cordelier* is, I think, just that collaborative group of poets and readers of which I spoke a moment

ago, cheerfully appreciative of each other's ingenuity. But collaborative poetry may seem to have distracted us from François Villon and his *œuvre*, and I should like briefly to explore the ways in which his involvement in this participatory, debate culture of the later Middle Ages is signalled in the *Testament*, and not only in lyrics like the *Contredictz de Franc Gontier* and the *Ballade de la Grosse Margot*, which pepper the reader with questions that renew the dialogic impulse, and which mimic and exploit debate, invite judgement from readers. What I want to emphasise is the way in which these lyrics, and the questions they crystallise, inscribe at the heart of the *Testament* a continuing conversation with predecessors and readers or listeners. The *Testament* is one long overture to the latter, categorised – schematically – into different groups: 'compains de galle' (*T*, 1720) or, to borrow the title Marot invents for what is usually called the *Ballade de bonne doctrine*, 'ceux de mauvaise vie' (*T*, 1692–719), those, 'toutes gens', to whom he needs to cry mercy (*T*, 1966–95). And not only that: as Hunt has shown in an interesting recent study,³³ Villon is constantly appealing to imaginary interlocutors and examining his own words to deflect captious comments:

Et qui me voudroit laidanger
De ce mot, en disant: 'Escoute!'; (*T*, 571–2)

or devising (more or less convincing) debating positions for putative opponents:

Je prens qu'aucun dye cecy,
Sy ne me contente il en rien; (*T*, 585–6)

or anticipating counter-arguments:

Et s'aucun m'interroque ou tente
Comment d'Amours j'ose mesdire (*T*, 725–6)

Villon hereby not only 'endow[s] the text with an attractive dynamism of an often theatrical sort',³⁴ he also locates himself in a network of cultural, poetic practices which put a premium precisely on the ability to enter into controversy: to engage, flexibly, ingeniously, with issues which need have nothing new about them, and might even have been thought to have been done to death.

This returns me to the question that I left in abeyance a moment ago: the (inescapable) intertextual dimension.³⁵ I suggested at the beginning of this chapter that, for modern readers, one of the features that makes late-medieval poems most difficult to grasp (let alone appreciate) is the fact that novelty and originality are not the

ambition of their creators. It is Siciliano's uncomprehending reiteration of this point that so often tinges his encyclopaedic study with exasperation:

La 'Domna' (très souvent sans merci), l'Amant (toujours plus martyr) continuèrent à vivre pendant des siècles une vie factice et monotone. Enluminée et immobile, la première suscite encore au XVe siècle la rhétorique la plus surannée et les débats les plus creux. Bien servant et attendant, timide, pleurant, geignant, l'Amant des Provençaux est encore et toujours cet Amant du XVe siècle.³⁶

I shall argue that the view which lies behind this exasperation is profoundly anachronistic, and that what is really at work, and not only in Villon's poetics, is yet another, and different, sort of engagement: a process which a critic of the troubadours, Jörn Gruber, has called an 'intertextual dialectic'.³⁷ Gruber too is suspicious of the contention that medieval poetry is nothing but 'un jeu de la poésie du lieu commun, du langage convenu, des clichés',³⁸ the emphasis on form at the expense of content is, he says, a stultifying one which fails to take proper account of conditions of reception. Troubadour lyrics, he contends, are not merely exercises in formal brilliance: rather, they are the product of highly intellectual processes whereby poets of each generation engage with, and transcend, the works of their predecessors, and whereby their highly sophisticated audiences respond to this transcendence, via, to quote Sarah Kay, 'a network of precise allusion criss-crossing down the centuries from text to text'. In choosing to designate this process by the word 'dialectic' (he talks of 'das Prinzip der intertextuellen Aufhebung', 'the principle of intertextual sublation'),³⁹ he is invoking Hegelian models of progress which see each successive generation, politically and intellectually speaking, as absorbing and excelling the previous one: an essentially dynamic and even competitive process which creates harmony from the recovery and resolution of opposing moments, past and present. What I shall suggest here is that fifteenth-century poetry – and in particular Villon's exploration of the amatory and the erotic which Siciliano dismisses so slightly – must be read dialectically, recognising the presence of predecessors and contemporaries but in ways which register that textual recovery is not plagiarism, nor some mechanical redeployment of commonplace, but something dynamic which generates an incremental excitement. This is, I think, a return to what Julia Kristeva meant when she coined the term *intertextualité*, and contended that every text is the absorption and transformation

of other texts.⁴⁰ Villon, like every other poet of the later Middle Ages, mobilises this sense of excitement: in other words, he is not Villon-the-outsider, the exiled genius that all literary manuals tend to dramatisé, he is rather, disconcertingly, at home in a literary and intertextual mainstream, and profoundly engaged – even, in some senses, competitively engaged – with the work of his predecessors and contemporaries.

That this is so will be more and more obvious as my study progresses; for the moment, however, what I want to sketch is the climate of intertextual dialectic within which Villon operates. Let me start with the question of competitiveness. This, of course, was something implicit in my discussion of the *cour amoureuse* and the *puy*: it was so also in my description of the relish with which the participants in the *Querelle de la Belle Dame sans Mercy* trump each other's conceits and sayings. What I want to suggest, however, takes up a point which relates to both the theoretical models – Bourdieu's and Gruber's – that I am developing here: that the passport to poetic (and therefore social) success lay in the poet's ability to reapprehend and out-perform his predecessors. I shall turn first to a poem which is overtly competitive in precisely the way that Gruber describes: a little-known *dit* by Pierre Chastellain, *Le temps perdu*,⁴¹ which with studious flamboyancy trumps Michault Taillevent's *Passe temps*.⁴² Michault was, it seems, one of the versifiers who pullulated at the court of Burgundy,⁴³ able to turn his hand to anything from encomium to exhortation. The *Passe temps* (produced, according to its editor, in 1440 or so) purports to be a soliloquy lamenting the passing of the poet's carefree youth. Like so many, Michault has frittered away his substance; now, poverty-stricken in his old age, he recognises – too late – his mistake. Pierre Chastellain, another Burgundian, claims to have come across Michault's *Passe temps* some ten years later: the poem has struck such a chord with him, for he too is poor and ageing, that he resolves to write a response. Thematically, of course, the poems are closely related, but I am less concerned here with theme than with Pierre's competitive responses to his predecessor. Take rhyme, for instance: Michault himself is no mean exponent of *rime riche*, but Pierre's rhymes are a bravura showcase of *rimes équivoques*. The final couplet of Michault's *Passe temps* plays with his own name:

C'est le Passe Temps de Michault,
A grant froidure demy chault.

(650–1)

Conventional enough, in fifteenth-century terms – but Pierre responds in his opening *septains* with a flashy, not to say meretricious, display of poetic ingenuity which takes a pitchfork to Michault's inoffensive little conceit:

En contemplant mon temps passé
Et le passe temps de Michaut,
J'ay mon temps perdu compassé
Duquel a present bien m'y chault.
Car point ne me suis demy chault
Trouvé tousjours a grant froidure,
Mais tousjours froit tant que froit dure. (1–7)

And it is not just that Pierre can out-pun his predecessor. Like many of his contemporaries,⁴⁴ Michault likes to crown each stanza with a proverb: 'Quant bergier dort, loup vient' (70). This is a real red rag to Pierre's bull: his proverbs are much more spectacular: 'Il a beau hurter a la porte / Qui le bran du moulin apporte' (286–7) or 'Qui scayt mectre gelines pondre / A l'aventure peult respondre' (27–8). But they are, it turns out, undoubtedly fakes: incomprehensible, undiscoverable in any proverb-dictionary. What is involved here, surely, is poetic one-upmanship: Michault can confect a neat little pun, but Pierre is the master of elaborate paronomasia; Michault can find a pedestrian proverb for every *septain*, but Pierre can manufacture couplets – and couplets with *rimes équivoques*.⁴⁵ To speak of 'competition' ('concours') would perhaps imply something more formal than the evidence allows, although it is of course interesting that it was at the instigation of Philippe le Hardi, Duke of Burgundy, and in his Parisian residence, the Hôtel d'Artois, that the *cour amoureuse* that I described earlier was founded. But even without that straw in the wind, at the thronging courts of Burgundy where poets vied with each other for visibility and ducal favour, social competition ('concurrence') must have constituted a powerful motive for ostentatious virtuosity and a passport to identification with a conspicuously successful inner circle.

Once again, this may seem to have taken us some way from François Villon – and yet he too, surely, is marked by this sort of participatory competitiveness. Modern readers, I said earlier, are disconcerted by the discovery that Villon produced as many as three consecutive lyrics on the *Ubi sunt* theme; what I shall suggest in chapter 3, however, is that we should see Villon as engaging with and transforming a poetic cliché in a way which conforms pleasingly

with Gruber's Hegelian model of absorption and transcendence. Indeed, it is not illegitimate to see Villon's whole magpie poetic strategy as recovery and transcendence: the choice of 'frame-narratives' (the *testament* and the *congé*); the hackneyed personae (the *amant martir*, the *bon follastre*); the sadly clichéd frame of reference in which bad luck in love is epitomised by Samson and Narcissus; the reworking of familiar literary stereotypes like the beautiful woman grown old (Villon's Belle Hëaulmiere). It is to this rather more diffuse intertextual literary climate within which Villon operates that I want to turn now. I shall do so by considering how two anodyne fifteenth-century amatory *dits* respond to one particular and inescapable intertext, the *Roman de la Rose* – inescapable because the eroticism and the amorous games of the fifteenth century are, as we shall see repeatedly in this book, so imbued with the *Rose* that it is difficult to write other than in its shadow. I choose the word 'respond' here carefully: like Gruber when he speaks of an intertextual 'dialectic', I mean something much more dynamic than the simple contention that the *Rose* is a source, or that the poets mention the *Rose*. By saying that a particular poet 'responds' intertextually to the *Rose*, I mean that the writer engages intellectually, in however clumsy or ill-informed or apparently inappropriate a way, with the arguments and topoi of the *Rose*.⁴⁶ Take, for instance, one of the more neglected of late-medieval allegories, *Le Chevalier des dames*, whose author calls himself Dolent Fortuné. In pointed reference to the *Rose*, this is yet another dream: the *acteur* is carried by a white greyhound to a beautiful garden, where he witnesses a *jouvencel*, Noble Cueur, coming to the defence of Dame Nature, who has been traduced by the *Rose* and its ilk. Dame Nature shows Noble Cueur an extraordinary tree, 'l'arbre dont l'umain lignage/Sourdist et sourt' (2043–4) – so extraordinary, says the *acteur*, that he has never seen anything like it. It divides into two branches (1860–5), and bears uncountable thousands of lovely flowers each lit as if by starlight (1885–7); the largest and topmost flower, 'une si belle fleur de lis' (1896), radiates 'clartez infinies' (1909). The tree stands in the very middle of a pool – a *fontainne* – so large that any flower that falls from the tree must fall into it, and which has water that is 'trouble et noir' (1930). Nature explains that the tree was made by God, who has confided it to the care of Nature and thereby made her responsible for generation – but, of course, under Him (2021–8). The tree is, of course, 'my party' because it figures male and female;

neither is higher than the other, because God does not wish either sex to predominate; at the Day of Judgement, in His great orchard, God will come to separate the perfect blooms from those that are faded or blemished. Meanwhile, as each flower blooms, a seed falls into the fountain, where Nature takes it and gives it 'forme et figure' (2168); it matures in the fountain for 'trois quars d'ans' (2173), and is then despatched by one of the 'tuaulx' into a 'nouvelle pasture' (2179). The water of the fountain is murky because it signifies sin (2188–91), and only for a single flower has the fountain ever run 'clere, nette et pure' (2217): the great and perfect flower which signifies 'la glorieuse et excellente / Le benoiste Vierge Marie' (2239–40).

No one who knows the *Rose* will have failed to detect its traces. The *Rose*, after all, is woven around two gardens: Deduit's a 'paradis terrestre' (636), lush and leisured, sensual and elegant, with the 'Fontaine d'Amour' at its centre, Genius's austere and luminous, framing the limpid fountain in whose light is truth unblemished.⁴⁷ Equally, however, no one who knows the *Rose* will have failed to recognise that Dolent Fortuné is not slavishly appropriating Deduit's garden or Genius' *parc*; rather, he is engaging with it, and in ways which only the reader who knows the *Rose* intimately and intellectually can weigh. First, of course, is the fact that Dolent Fortuné has eliminated Genius, and with him, much of the uneasiness for which he is responsible: readers of the *Rose*, surely designedly, can never quite abstract his sermon from the disturbing little vignette which precedes it and which shows Venus, bubbling with irrepressible laughter, handing Genius a lighted candle not, says Jean de Meun archly, made of 'cire vierge' (*Rose*, 19460).⁴⁸ More seriously, Dolent Fortuné has surely recovered Nature and the fountain and the tree for an unambiguously Christian message: no trace survives of Genius' passionate but suspect call to fecundity (*Rose*, 19657–96). One might even argue that Dolent Fortuné – although I think it unlikely that he had read Alain de Lille – has repositioned his Nature as something like Alain's, an advocate not of lush procreation but of marriage (hymen) and tempered sexuality, responsible under God's authority for the form of creatures.⁴⁹

But I would suggest that Dolent Fortuné does more than this – more than turn a highly disturbing, because ambiguous, image into a rather flat account of female fertility (the nine months, the *tuaulx*, etc.); he can do so because he is speaking to informed readers whose

initial response to the *Rose* has been highly expert and observant. Take, for instance, the fountain. One plank of Genius' sermon in the *Rose*, we remember, is an extended comparison (20339–548) between Guillaume's fountain of Narcissus, the centrepiece of Deduit's garden, and the fountain in Genius' own *parc*. Genius lists, scathingly, Guillaume's misrepresentations. The latter reported that the water in Deduit's fountain is 'plus clere qu'argenz fins' (*Rose*, 20402); on the contrary, says Genius, the water which killed Narcissus cannot be other than *amere* and *venimeuse*, 'si trouble et si leide / que chascuns qui sa teste i boute / por soi mirer, il n'i voit goute' (*Rose*, 20404–6); the fountain of the *parc*, by contrast, is genuinely life-giving, 'bele et clere et nete et pure' (*Rose*, 20359). Guillaume de Lorris had claimed that his fountain was lit by two crystals that reflect the garden; on the contrary, says Genius, the crystals are deceptive, 'troubles et nueus' (*Rose*, 20418), whereas the fountain of the *parc* is lit by a miraculous carbuncle which alone can reflect the truth complete. Guillaume's fountain was shaded by a mere pine-tree; the fountain of the *parc* feeds a great olive-tree which bears 'le fruit de salu' (*Rose* 20493). Now, no one would argue that Dolent Fortuné is particularly subtle, but that does not prevent him from engaging with precisely this argument. He does so, with some independence of spirit, by amalgamating the fountains. The iconography of his fountain is rather banally Christian: the tree is the Tree of Life, the fountain the waters of sin, the *fleur de lys* from which the great light radiates is the Virgin Mary. No mystery subsists and all objects described have a one-to-one significance, so that if, say, the fountain is 'trouble et noir' (*Chevalier*, 2185), this is simply because it represents sin. So too, one could argue, does Guillaume's, at least according to Genius; but of course, in the *Rose*, there was something unsettling in finding Genius the sensualist condemning sensuality. Similarly, Nature's garden in the *Chevalier des dames* is unambiguously a paradise where the Virgin is in her proper place – thus engaging with the problems of the rival gardens in the *Rose* where iconographical elements such as the lamb and the persistent trinities do not *quite* suffice to identify Genius' *parc* with the (earthly) paradise.

All of this, of course, presumes readers highly trained not only to recognise allusion but to detect the expertise with which the deriving poet has inflected and recast it,⁵⁰ and because such expertise is a given in the arguments I shall develop in this book, I shall offer a further example of what I mean: Pierre de Hauteville's *Confession et*

testament de l'Amant trespasé de deuil. I choose it for several reasons: first because Pierre – if he was the author⁵¹ – was the *Prince du Bailliage d'Amour* in the *cour amoureuse*, secondly because his *Testament* attaches to the *Belle Dame* cycle, thirdly because it is one of the 'wills' on which Villon himself may have drawn,⁵² and finally because it figures, in ways which are (as I shall argue later in this chapter) significant, alongside Villon's own *œuvre* in one of the great poetic compilations of the later Middle Ages. Pierre's mawkish title misleads; it is in fact, we discover progressively, a richly comic, even parodic, text. The speaker, the 'povre amant', is discovered lying on his deathbed; his lady is dead, and all he can do is weep. He demands confession, and summons 'monseigneur le curé'; he accepts that he has sinned with every sense, but he is so unrepentant that the *curé* is unable to offer him absolution. Unabsolved, he has the *curé* booted out, draws up his will, makes arrangements for a spectacularly sentimental funeral, and dies dramatically. Nothing there, then, but what might seem vapid. And yet – consider the episode in which the speaker admits to *avarice* (281–324). He has, he said, attempted – unscrupulously! – to seduce his lady, and crept up her stair past her guardian Dangier, who 'couchoit sur la viz / De la chambre ou lors fort ronffloit / Puis Faulx Samblant dormoit, souffloit' (*Confession*, 297–9). But alas: as he opens the door, the hinges creak, Dangier wakes up, and the gallant lover is obliged to take refuge perched, uncomfortably, 'sur le faiste d'une lucerne' (312). Now several factors converge here. The first is something which, of course, we meet constantly in Villon's *Testament*, the counterfeit confession: this apparently self-demeaning, but actually self-glorifying, episode is told with such manifest enjoyment, and so unapologetically, that it is impossible to take the speaker's mealy-mouthed disclaimer ('Non pas que me vueille excuser / Du pechié', 319–20) seriously. Second, however, and much more important for my purposes here, is the introduction of Dangier, whose name we should translate, perhaps, as Dahlberg does, as 'Resistance', or perhaps 'maidenly reserve'.⁵³ Clearly Pierre expects Dangier to be familiar: there is no description. And of course there is no need: this is the Dangier of the *Rose*, lurking in corners covered in grass and leaves (*Rose*, 2809–16, 14787–95), but signally open to flattery and fair words and, in the end, singularly ineffective: a lot of bluster to very little purpose. The *Rose's* Dangier lets himself be neutralised, tamely, by Pitié's tears and Venus' arrow,⁵⁴ while Pierre's trots back to bed and leaves the way

open for a lubricious lover who, he will tell us later with pleasantly sensuous retrospection, has indulged every extremity – nose, hands, feet . . . (439–68).

Now, it would be easy to say that Pierre de Hauteville had borrowed Dangier, clumsily, from the convenient psychomachia of the *Rose*: easy, but misleading. The *Rose*'s Dangier, we remember, like all the abstractions of the *Rose*, is a complex and ambivalent figure:⁵⁵ highly perceptive, since he is the one who recognises, rightly, just how disingenuous Amant is being when he suggests, with sly innocence, that if he has committed a fault or a sin, perhaps he should be imprisoned with Bel Accueil (*Rose*, 14977–84), and who can measure just how uncourteous Amant is (*Rose*, 14830–4). Pierre's Dangier seems at first sight – if only because he is much more evanescent – slighter and more one-dimensional. But this is to underestimate Dangier's role: just as in the *Rose*, so the mere advent of Dangier deflects the moral and aesthetic course of Pierre's *Testament*, and just as the association, however distant, between the hideous *villain* Dangier and the *Rose* introduces a sense of faint unease as to the character of the latter, so, in Pierre's work, the lady of whom the 'Amant trespassé de duel' has spoken with such delicate seriousness is tainted by the absurdity of her defender's antics. Dangier, who in the *Rose* is the first intimation that the Amant's pursuit of the *Rose* may be more problematic than he had been led to expect (*Rose*, 2809–20), serves in Pierre de Hauteville's *Testament* to suggest that the Dame may be a little less virtuous than Pierre had implied: Pierre, in other words, can capitalise on the intersection of his *Testament* and the *Rose* to recover and recycle the paradoxes of the latter – assuming, of course, and this is the point which will be crucial for our reading of Villon, that he is addressing himself to what I called a little earlier the reader's 'textual and intertextual expertise'.

Let me explain what I mean by this latter phrase, which will colour much of what I say in this book. There is no longer any need, surely, to insist on the textual hermeneutics which characterised the study of the Bible and the writers of the ancient world in the medieval schools: the meticulous and agile scholarship which went into glossing and interpretation, the ingenuity which looked so studiously beneath the textual surface.⁵⁶ We can measure, now, the interpretative burden joyfully shouldered by medieval scholars as they sought to penetrate the textual obscurities of the *auctoritates*, and

we know the prodigious feats of memory and cross-referencing that this required. It should not come as a surprise, then, given that the more sophisticated of vernacular writers often emerged from that very tradition, to find – as an instance from the *Rose* will show – that they expected just such commitment from their readers. Raison is explaining to Amant that he must go beyond the linguistic surface to unravel the ‘paraboles, / qui mout sunt beles a entendre’ (*Rose*, 7124–5); patient interpretation will reveal ‘une grant partie / des secrez de philosophie’ (*Rose*, 7139–40). The process, she says, juggling chiasmus and *annominatio* (play on words with the same root), adds pure pleasure to profit:

mout te vodras *deliter*,
 et si porras mout *profiter*.
 en *delitant profiteras*,
 en *profitant deliteras*;
 car en leur geus et en leur fables
 gisent *deliz* mout *profitables*. (Rose, 7141–6)

What she is recommending is a reading which is contemplative, analytical, and observant. She is also, by an adroit effect of *mise en abyme*, providing a blueprint for the reading of the *Rose* itself, which demands an astonishingly retentive textual memory, as witness the way in which the reader is required to register the God of Love’s disconcertingly concrete – if conventional – metaphor for the effect of sight on the heart:

Et saches que dou regarder
 feras ton cuer frire et *larder*. . .
 Qui ce qu’il aime plus regarde
 plus alume son cuer et *larde*, (Rose, 2329–30, 2333–4)

and to recognise it, some 20,000 lines later, as Jean de Meun makes Pygmalion’s masculine eye travel across his sculpted Galatea made miraculously flesh, and Jean reverts to the God of Love’s studiously over-determined metaphor:

Et quant de plus pres la regarde
 Plus art son queur et frit et *larde*. (Rose, 21101–2)

This feat of memory is, surely, not just a matter of Jean squirrelling away a handy rhyme; it is also strategic, creating a dialogue with the remainder of the romance whereby the couplet carries with it, for the expert reader, all the thematic baggage which it carried in the God of Love’s discourse.

Once again, I may seem to have wandered rather far from

François Villon. One reason is strategic: I shall argue, persistently, that Villon is engaging throughout his *œuvre* in the same dialectic with the *Rose* as do Dolent Fortuné and Pierre de Hauteville, but with even more subtlety, even more acuity and with a precision which supposes an even more textually and intertextually expert reader. I revert here, deliberately, to Gruber's 'intertextual dialectic'. Everyone, for instance, has always said that La Belle Héaulmiere is a reprise of the *Rose's* La Vieille, but what I shall suggest in chapter 4 is something much more dynamic than mere borrowing: a process which one might call mutual illumination, in which the informed and expert reader whom I postulate recognises the ways in which poem and source intersect, collude, collide and relativise each other. My point is not that Pierre's and Dolent Fortuné's intertextualities are in any way comparable to Villon's; simply, it is that they and their ilk have 'trained' their readers to be highly sensitive to the inflexions which an ingenious or dexterous poet can operate on a canonical text.

These terms, however, are not self-evident, and I turn to them now via a codicological *fait divers*. Pierre de Hauteville's *Testament* seems to have enjoyed a modest popularity in the late Middle Ages: it exists in four manuscripts, and also figures in the late-medieval incunable anthology known as the *Jardin de plaisance*.⁵⁷ This is one of the most important anthologies of courtly poetry of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, all of it presented anonymously but much of it identifiable and proving to be by poets whose names are familiar, as it happens, from what I have said in this chapter: Alain Chartier, Baudet Herenc, Achille Caulier, Michault Taillevent, Pierre Chastelain, not to mention Villon himself. The anthologist, who calls himself 'L'Infortuné', is more than just a slavish copyist and compiler: not only has he constructed a (rather rudimentary) narrative based around a *jardin d'amour* to frame his multiplicity of texts, not only has he paid attention to the articulation of poem with poem, but he has also, from time to time, made adaptations to improve the cohesion of his carefully conceived volume. In the case of Pierre de Hauteville's *Testament*, he seems to have added a couple of *sizains*. They come at the point where Pierre, having made his long confession, finally begins to draw up his will; in the intercalated *huitain* in the *Jardin de plaisance*, he turns to *his* clerk and says:

Sus, mon clerc, il te fault penser.

Apporte moy encre et papier

Et escry cy mon ordonnance
 Et pense tost de t'avancer
 Sans aucunement deslayer
 Ce que diray a ma plaisance.⁵⁸

Here, of course, we cannot help being reminded of Villon's *Testament*. At precisely the same point in the frame-story of his *Testament*, Villon's persona turns to his clerk, 'Fremin', and addresses him in rather similar terms:

Fremin, siez toy pres de mon lit,
 Que l'en ne me viengne espier.
 Pren ancre tost, plume, pappier,
 Ce que nomme escriptz vistement,
 Puis fay le partout coppier.
 Et vecy le commencement. (T, 787-92)

Admittedly, we could argue that the similarity is merely situational: after all, there must come a point in the composition of any medieval fictional will where the poet will demand a scribe with writing implements. On the other hand, the distinct similarities which we find here – the fact that the will is to be dictated, the emphasis on speed, the presence of *papier* as a rhyme-word – are not shared with the other fictional testaments of the later Middle Ages.⁵⁹ Is it legitimate therefore to wonder whether L'Infortuné has not introduced a couple of anodyne stanzas to highlight – for cognoscenti – the relatedness of Pierre's *Testament* and Villon's? After all, although the *Jardin de plaisance* contains neither the *Lais* nor the *Testament in extenso*, it plays host to a number of Villon's fixed-form lyrics,⁶⁰ some, like the *Ballade de la Grosse Margot* and the *Ballade des langues ennuyeuses*, excerpted from the *Testament*. It is fruitless to speculate, and indeed my point is not to search for sources, but rather to point out L'Infortuné's comfortable expertise in the broad spectrum of fifteenth-century verse, his ingenuity in creating cross-references which he expects his 'informed' readers to relish.

'Informed' readers, after all, were conversant with what amounts to a curriculum of texts, texts very different from what we might today elect to the 'canon' of late-medieval verse. In two of its four manuscripts, Pierre de Hauteville's *Testament* is followed by two additional poems, a *Complainte* and something wordily called *L'inventaire des biens demourez du décès de l'amant trespasé de deuil*. After the Amant's death, his household proceeds to an inventory of his effects, among which (425-44) is his library: a highly particular book-room

where we find the *Lancelot* which, Dante tells us, transported Paolo and Francesca, the *Rose* which was the standard handbook on matters amorous, and a series of those other texts – Chartier's *Belle Dame* and its progeny – which are recognisable as the carefully cross-referenced, carefully interlocked poems on which I have particularly concentrated here. And here again, of course, the poet surely expects his readers to understand the parallelisms and homologies which make their coherence: to be conversant with what, to use another of Bourdieu's terms, made up the late-medieval *doxa*, that stereotyped lore, those familiar texts and those conventional psychologies of love which constitute the given cultural norm.

The sort of codicological coherence which I am talking about here will seem recognisable enough these days to anyone working on narrative codices; much less work has been done on the great late-medieval lyrico-narrative miscellanies which have been ransacked for individual poems and poets, but very rarely examined in their totality.⁶¹ We know dispiritingly little about how they were compiled, and still less about how they were read: cover to cover, systematically? Haphazardly, serendipitously? This is not the place for a full-scale study of the phenomenon, but the question deserves serious attention:⁶² the anthologies furnish excellent source-material for the study of the *domaine littéraire* in the late fifteenth century. The codicological transmission of Villon's verse would also benefit from a full-scale study: what, for instance, if any, are the 'editorial' principles underlying the excerpting of particular lyrics and their insertion in particular manuscripts?⁶³ What, if any, is the evidence for the interdependence of the different miscellanies in which independent poems of Villon's figure? How do these independent poems 'read' against their environments?

Some of these points will arise later in this study; for the moment, however, I want to concentrate on two of the major lyrico-narrative miscellanies which include the *Testament* and/or the *Lais*: A, Paris, BNF Arsenal 3523,⁶⁴ and B, Paris, BNF français 1661.⁶⁵ The first, a late fifteenth-century compilation which contains both *Lais* and *Testament*, consists of 818 pages, written in various different hands;⁶⁶ some critics have argued that it is a composite – that is, a volume amalgamating sheets and gatherings from more than one pre-existing manuscript – but it is difficult to be quite so categorical, and I am inclined to see it as a coherent and single codex.⁶⁷ It includes Chartier's *Belle dame sans Mercy* and a number of the poems from that

cycle which, as we have seen, invite cross-analysis; it also includes complementary poems like Michault Taillevent's *Passe temps* and Pierre Chastellain's *Temps perdu*, and Alain Chartier's *Breviaire des nobles* with its counterpart, Michault Taillevent's *Psautier des vilains*. It includes a curious poem from what I am inclined to call the *Franc Gontier* cycle;⁶⁸ it includes Pierre de Hauteville's *Confession et testament*. Nothing, of course, prevents any reader reading each text discretely – but to do so is to miss the enjoyment which arises from cross-reading poems which contribute to each other's significance: the editor or *concepteur* who put Arsenal 3523 together plainly enjoyed the manipulation of poetic links and the creation of poetic synergies.⁶⁹

Take, for instance, one of the less promising juxtapositions: an odd little poem called *Le grand garde derriere*.⁷⁰ It is a monologue: the speaker is an *amant lourdaud*, a peasant up from the country, complaining of a lady who is obviously fleecing him. It is related to the late-medieval *monologues d'amoureux* – related, but with significant differences. The latter, says Aubailly, possess a 'plan quasi immuable': the speakers are 'amoureux vantards', unjustifiably confident of their charms and accomplishments.⁷¹ With absurd self-satisfaction, they organise a rendez-vous with the lady of their dreams – only, bathetically, to find themselves cruelly disappointed by some unexpected event like the contents of a chamber-pot hurled from an upper window, or the inopportune arrival of the nightwatch: the humour stems from the speaker's unpuncturable and contemptible vanity.

The 'I' of *Le grand garde derriere* is rather different: he is perfectly well aware that he dances clumsily, that his dress is coarse, his manners unrefined. He knows he is unsuccessful: the lady is, he says, 'si propre et si cointe et si belle' (stanza 29) that she must have a *garde derriere*, a favoured suitor, and he is not the elect. The poem is a string of absurdities which show how the ardent lover is reduced to the most laughable of acts: cherishing a *crotte* scraped from the lady's doorstep (stanzas 6–7), worshipping her very door ('Le povre martir / Baise verroux et gaches au partir, Comme se fust quelque bel sanctuaire': stanza 28). But this lover knows he is, like all lovers, absurd:

Prenez en gré, qui lisez en ce livre,
En excusant quelque pou ma folie;
Quant je le feis, par ma foy, j'estoye ivre, (stanza 34)

So that whereas the lover-speakers of the *monologues d'amoureux* invite our derision because they are so confident of their amorous prowess

and unconscious of their own absurdity, the speaker of *Le grand garde derriere* elicits a sort of baffled sympathy, a faint sense of outrage at the anonymous lady.

Now, as before, I do not want to over-interpret: we cannot possibly know how consciously this short and not particularly memorable little monologue was juxtaposed to Villon's *Lais* and *Testament*. Nevertheless, to read Villon's lachrymose (and also faintly absurd) amorous persona against the *amant lourdaud* of *Le grand garde derriere* is to invite cross-reference and thus multiply meaning: Villon, after all, does not cut too impressive a figure as the Errol Flynn of fifteenth-century Paris.⁷² His lady too, as we shall see in chapters 2 and 4, seems to have played fast and loose with him: having him beaten (*T*, 657–64), deceiving him with pillow-talk (*T*, 684–8), bamboozling him (*T*, 689–704). My point is not that Villon or the author of *Le grand garde derriere* depend on each other: rather, it is that the client or the *concepteur* who chose the contents of ms. A chose to create what, borrowing Bakhtinian terminology, we might call a *polyphonic codex*: one 'in which many disparate points of view enter into dialogue', and in which we find a 'plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices'.⁷³ Ms. A is designed, ideally, for a reader whose habit of mind is cumulative or convergent: a reader for whom enjoyment consists in the perception and investigation of homologies.

As, I suggest, is also the other anthology which I mentioned: ms. B, français 1661, which contains the *Lais* (though not the *Testament*). There is a certain overlap between the two codices, although nothing seems to suggest that they are interdependent: both, for instance, contain some of the poems from the *Belle Dame* cycle (*Le jugement du pauvre triste amant banni*, Achille Caulier's *Hopital d'amour* and the *Amant rendu cordelier*); both contain Alain Chartier's *Breviaire des nobles*; both contain *Le plaidoyer* [or *débat*] *de la demoiselle et de la bourgeoise*, which is sometimes attributed to Blosseville.⁷⁴ I shall focus on this latter precisely because it belongs to both codices, and because, as the very first poem in fr. 1661, it frames the codex along with Villon's *Lais*, which is the very last. This drawing together of the manuscript, I shall suggest, sets up a dialogue between text and text where, in another classic instance of Bakhtinian polyphony, the designer of the codex accumulates points of view whose juxtapositions create dialogue and debate without offering resolution.

Le plaidoyer de la demoiselle et de la bourgeoise is, of course, yet another

lawcourt debate. The speaker – dismally familiar scenario! – is transported in a dream to a *palais de flours* where he overhears a debate. The matter at issue is, on the surface, a question of etiquette: Bourgoise complains bitterly that Damoiselle is claiming precedence over her on grounds of rank since she, Damoiselle, is entitled to wear the more aristocratic *atour*, ‘hennin’ (tall conical head-dress), whereas Bourgoise wears a *chaperon*, ‘bonnet’.⁷⁵ But head-dresses and etiquette are pretexts: the question that the women in fact debate relates to rank and, much more rancorously, to sexual integrity. Bourgoise, says Damoiselle with fastidious distaste, is sexually rampant, but any lovers who dare to address her *cuisses petites* ‘gasteroient là leurs chausses’ (p. 20). Damoiselle, says Bourgoise, is the archetypal tease whose lovers are expected to languish but never to enjoy: she, on the other hand, is sexually generous. The poem seems, of course, to have to do only most tangentially with Villon’s *œuvre*, and yet textual evidence suggests that the poet at least knew and intended to exploit Villon’s *Testament*. At one point as the debate progresses, Bourgoise says that, because she is a *dame*, Damoiselle must owe her ‘honneur et service’; the claim, says Damoiselle, is ‘une vraye mocquerie’ – and moreover, Bourgoise cannot even claim the *hommage* of a lover, because she is in fief to her, Damoiselle. Bourgoise is furiously indignant:

Par Dieu, s’il tient de nous en fief,
 Tout du long l’en luy recevra,
 Et si n’avez pas le relief
 Ou le quint qui deu en sera,
 Croyés qu’on vous en gardera;
 Plus que vous on n’est *serf ne biche*;
 Ne rien on ne *tient ne tiendra*
 De vous, m’amy, s’il n’est *en friche*. (p. 16)

No one, of course, will miss the intertextual echo of Villon’s bitter diatribe against Thibaut d’Aussigny:⁷⁶

Mon seigneur n’est ne mon evesque,
 Soubz luy ne *tiens s’il n’est en friche*;
 Foy ne luy doy n’ommaige avecque,
 Je ne suis *son serf ne sa biche*. (T, 9–12)

And it may well be that in ms. B, the anthologist hoped to create a concordance or dialogue between the *Plaidoyer* and the *Testament*: to inflect the pun so as to relocate possible homoerotic overtones to heterosexual ones, and to sift questions of authority and dominance

as had Villon. But what I shall suggest is that there is a more compelling relationship: with Villon's *Lais*.

Take, for instance, the opening of the *Plaidoyer*. The speaker, as I suggested above, is mobilising two of the givens of late-medieval romance, those that the *Rose* had made virtually canonical: the spring opening, and the dream. But this is the *Rose* reversed: this 'jour de may' is 'trouble et pluvieux', and what compels the poet into his dream is not the 'tens enmoreus' of the *Rose* (*Rose*, 48) – not, therefore, an agreeable correlation of the phenomenological and the psychological – but rather 'ung vent de bise' appropriate to a dream which is not erotic but disputatious. Now of course this act of intertextual provocation is precisely analogous to Villon's in the opening to the *Lais*: he too, like the poet of the *Plaidoyer*, mobilises the 'morte saison' to actuate a sullen, dysphoric world. That alone certainly would not justify my using the term 'polyphonic codex' for ms. B; what seems to authorise it is the way in which the argument in the *Plaidoyer* cross-cuts with the 'autobiography' which the *Lais* sketches. Villon positions himself in the *Lais* in the classic late-medieval persona of the *amant martyr*. His tormentor, an anonymous *celle*, has cozened him with 'doulx regars' and 'beaux semblans' whose 'tres decevante saveur' has pierced him to the 'flans' (*L*, 26–8). In a little cascade of carefully ambiguous metaphors, he makes it abundantly clear that the reference to *flans*, 'flanks', 'loins', is not just a convenient rhyme. On the contrary, his lady is a sexual tease who offers and withdraws: the *doulx regars* that he had found so promising

ont vers moy les piés blancs
Et me faillent au grant besoing:
Planter me fault aultres complans
Et frapper en ung aultre coing. (L, 29–32)

But this sort of mean-spirited and dishonourable sexual behaviour is precisely what Damoiselle is accused of in the *Plaidoyer*: as we have seen – and as she herself admits – what gives her real pleasure is not a lover in her bed but a lover at her feet, kept in a state of passionate but unsatisfied desire:

S'ilz sont chaulx, nous les evantons
En les tirant par les cheveux,
Et là les povres valletons
Nous font [lors] promesses et veulx. (p. 22)

The dismissive diminutive 'povres valletons' gives the game away: Damoiselle, like Villon's *celle* (but, as we shall see in chapters 4 and 5, unlike the Belle Hëaulmiere and even Grosse Margot) will always promise but always disappoint.

Once again, of course, it is unwise to insist on scribal intention; whoever commissioned or planned ms. B has left no statement of intent. But the design of the codex surely does suggest an intellectual strategy: Damoiselle and Villon's *celle*, the first proclaiming her own coqueties, the second bitterly reproached for just that, are mirror images one of the other, who frame and focus what might appear to be a bewildering diversity. At the very least, the pattern of potentialities that the manuscript provides allows for that expansion in meaning which comes from reading one poem against another, either because they are similar and therefore reinforce each other, or because they are dissimilar and therefore react one with the other.⁷⁷ Each piece may invite piecemeal reading, but the codex in its totality lays claim to the reader's total view, and in that total view, where text confirms, contradicts, supplements text, lies Bakhtin's 'mutual illumination of language'.⁷⁸ I am not suggesting that readers *must* read poem against poem; I am, however, suggesting that if they are fully to exploit the pleasures made available to them, they need to savour the dialogue of text with text, and recognise the counterpoints and synergies which their proximities allow. All of which, of course, argues that at the level of the fifteenth-century codex also, the implied reader⁷⁹ is what I called earlier an *expert* reader: one who is not only textually well informed in the sense of possessing canonical texts like the *Roman de la Rose*, but also textually ingenious, with a habit of mind which is opportunistically intertextual and intra-textual. Ms. B, like ms. A, in other words, responds to that poetics of debate and provocation which I have called a poetics of engagement.

I referred earlier to Siciliano's exasperated puzzlement at the central paradox of Villon's *œuvre*: that it promises the plenitude of an individual presence, but that the speaking self turns out on closer examination to be like Prufrock's, defined by the fragments of other people's discourses. What I propose to argue in the remainder of this study is that the speaking self is not fragmented but rather held in place by the multiplicity of competing discourses, and that its individuality, its plenitude, is the product of their intersection, as the poet, like Gruber's troubadours, absorbs and transcends his prede-

cessors and his contemporaries. Rather than looking for a chimerical unity' located in something we think of as 'the poet's mind', perhaps we need to recognise and centralise the self-consuming dialectic that is the very stuff of the *Testament* and of Villon's *œuvre* in general. The ruptures and discontinuities of his will, the competing voices pinned like butterflies to the textual surface of the *Testament*, effect what we might call a convergence which both parades and, oddly, anchors what I called in my Introduction the speaker's nomadic subjectivity. The aware reader – the 'expert' fifteenth-century or modern reader whom I postulate for Villon's poems – is presented with a cinematic montage: intertextual and alien fragments from the discreet Alain Chartier, the quietly ironic Charles d'Orléans, the ubiquitous and flexible *Rose*; transtextual echoes as Villon, characteristically, cannibalises himself from *Lais* to *Testament*, intratextual and provocative allusions from self to other to self again across the *Testament* itself. Villon's *Testament*, I shall suggest, is a dialogue: a stage on which differing points of view engage with each other, and the poet himself is a player.⁸⁰ That Villon's conspicuous and self-congratulatory self-assertion – as, say, in the final ballade – does not produce the impression of a coherent and inviolable self is a cue to new reading strategies: the meaning of the *Testament* will derive from a dialectical progress through its parts. And not only through its parts, but also, as this present paragraph will no doubt have implied, through a trans-textual progress – and that is why I shall begin by exploring the *Testament's* transtextual dialogue with the *Lais*, and in particular with that despised poetic persona of the fifteenth century, the martyred and despairing lover. I do so in part provocatively: Villon-as-martyred-lover is a construct of such flagrant literarity that most commentators have skated over what they plainly see as the merest artifice, and therefore barely worthy of serious critical attention. I shall not argue a biographical case: we have no way of judging whether Villon's cruel lady existed, still less of identifying her. What I shall do, however, is to take seriously what so many have disregarded, and argue that the literarity of Villon's persona in the *Testament* is of its very essence, and that it constitutes one aspect of what I called his symbolic capital: Villon, I shall suggest, is engaging, creatively, with an essentially literary persona, and thereby operating, expertly, in a market-place in which the martyred lover is a currency. Sedulously he constructs a *roman du moi*⁸¹ – but equally sedulously, he problematises it, inviting us to recognise the clichés in

which he is trading, and in particular flaunting his engagement with an illustrious authority, the *Roman de la Rose*. What Villon explores via his martyred self is the limits of mimesis, or illusionism: his is a calculated dialogue with his predecessors, a resolutely dialectical manipulation of poetic commonplace, a recognition that identity is art.